



Testimony in Support of HB 5408, AN ACT CONCERNING THE PRESENTATION OF A CARRY PERMIT.

Submitted by Police Officer Ricardo Lopez, Bridgeport Police Department and Vice President, Bridgeport Police Union/AFSCME Local 1159, Before the Public Safety Committee – March 3, 2016

Good morning Chairman Larson, Chairman Dargan, and members of the Public Safety committee.

My name is P/O Ricardo Lopez of the Bridgeport Police Department. I am also the Vice President of Bridgeport Police AFSCME Union Local 1159. I am here to testify in favor of HB 5408. I would like to thank Bridgeport State Senator Ed Gomes and Representative Steve Stafstrom for their support on this bill.

Many of you may have recently seen a video that went viral via social media in which three Bridgeport Police officers confronted a man in a Subway Shop downtown Bridgeport who was openly carrying a handgun. There is also a subsequent video in a nearby shoe store which partly what precipitated this hearing. I was one of the officers in both videos.

I would like to take this opportunity to offer a bit more clarity on those events. Unseen and/or unclear in the videos at the time of the incident the open carry party was wearing what is popularly called "Skinny sweat pants" with a police style holster and a silver/ black handgun. As I'm sure you all can imagine there was nothing discrete or subtle about his method of open carry. Nor would the rest of his attire lead any reasonable person to believe that open carry may be due to his occupation/profession. (i.e. Security, Law Enforcement, etc.)

In the second of the two videos I'm seen trying to utilize my 23 years of community policing and de-escalation experience to explain to the party the reason for police and public concern. But it is clear to see that he had no interest in a reasonable discussion and only desired to provoke an outburst or an aggressive reaction from police.

And after watching his mannerisms in the video and learning about his history, a strong argument can be made that his actual intent was to provoke a confrontation with police for a possible lawsuit or just social media celebrity.

At the time of the incident I was very familiar with the current open carry law. Our past training and discussions left most if not all of us with an uncertainty due to the fact that the law seemed convoluted.

Immediately after the video incident, a massive discussion on the the open carry law was ignited throughout our department in every division and rank. I had about 50% of the department patting me on back for a job well done, primarily for displaying such patience and restraint, while the other 50% believed wholeheartedly that he should have been arrested, primarily based on technicalities with in the open carry law. There still isn't a strong consensus within our department, and I believe throughout all the police departments in our state, on how to apply the current open carry law.

If there was ever a time when police required clarity on how to enforce a law it is now, in the age of social media, 24 hour news coverage and anti-police sentiment. It is in the best interest of our citizens and police officers that we avoid relying on technicalities to justify a confrontation or an arrest.

Bridgeport, like all the cities throughout our state is plagued with gun violence. We have a diverse community of residents who are not accustomed to seeing open carry without being alarmed. This has in the past and will continue to result in 911 calls that cannot be ignored and require officers to be placed in the same quandary again and again. The wide majority of the time our citizens with legal handgun permits do not hesitate to produce their gun permits when asked and are treated with professionalism and courtesy. They recognize that it is also in their best interest that the only people carrying guns are doing it legally and their police are making sure of it.

HB 5408's desired intent is not about removing rights from legal guns owners. It's about ensuring that an unfamiliar party walking the streets with an exposed handgun truly is utilizing his legal right to do so.

You all have the power to determine whether a future open carry confrontation between legal handgun permit holders and police result in either "Hi sir, can I see your permit please. Here you go officer. Thank you sir have a nice day." Or another video like the two that I described. Or far worse, an escalation or misunderstanding resulting in gunfire.

So I implore you to grant the citizens of Connecticut and Police Officers throughout our State the benefit and comfort of clarity by endorsing, promoting and approving HB5408. It is a common sense law that is in the best interest of us all.

I thank you for your time and consideration.